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Meris Mandernach, "Collection Management 101: Developing and Implementing a Workshop Series" (2009). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.
[http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284314753](https://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284314753)

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COLLECTION MANAGEMENT 101: DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A WORKSHOP SERIES

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Abstract

Collections, whether in print or electronic, comprise a large percentage of any given library's budget. Collections require constant attention given that they need to grow and respond to curricular changes. The skills needed for successful collection management reside between an art and a science, based on facts but balanced by local user needs. At the same time collection development or collection management is often not a required course during library school. In order to gain practical tools and ideas that can be hard to glean from merely reading the literature, the Collection Management Librarian at James Madison University (JMU) visited peer institutions as well as schools with strong collection programs during the summer of 2009. The outcome of these travels was a locally implemented workshop series that covered the fundamentals of collection management. The session provided an overview of the project, findings from interviews at other schools, an outline of the workshop topics, and ideas for implementing a workshop series locally.

Background of Collection Management at James Madison University

James Madison University is a comprehensive university that is part of a statewide system of public higher education in the Commonwealth of Virginia. JMU offers programs on bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels with its primary emphasis on the undergraduate student. The majority of the funds that JMU expends on library collections are from state funds rather than local endowments. JMU is also a member of the state-wide consortia VIVA, which provides access to both databases and journal collections. JMU has particular curricular strengths in the areas of Business, Audiology/Speech Pathology, Assessment (Psychology), Education, Music, and Nursing.

Considering that the JMU Libraries spent 41% of the FY09 budget on collections, making informed decisions is a primary focus for JMU selectors. These subject specialists are responsible for building the collections and have a variety of backgrounds in collection development and assessment. While some had collection development courses in library school, several indicated an interest in a workshop series covering the general principles of collection management in order to develop a holistic view of the library collection at JMU.

Collection Management Department as a distinct entity at JMU is a relatively recent phenomenon. In April 2008, the Collection Management department was created. It is composed of a full-time librarian, one full-time staff member, and two part-time (30 hours/week) staff members. The Collection Management department serves as a center point for communicating between selectors, library database/journal vendors, and other departments within technical services at JMU. The Collection Management department is responsible for year-end library statistics, selector statistical requests (circulation, cost/use, accreditation reports, and weeding statistics), journal and database statistics management, trials for electronic resources, replacements for lost or damaged materials, gift books, configuration of the approval plan, and updating/maintaining a database of information about our subscription resources. This department is the first point of contact for troubleshooting off-campus access

issues to library resources. Additionally, the Collection Management department gathers data as needed to support selectors and the Collection Development Committee (CDC) in the collection development endeavors of the library. Since the Collection Management Department was a recent addition to the organizational structure at JMU, gathering practices and procedures from a wide variety of other institutions would allow the Collection Management Librarian to generate ideas for local implementation.

The Summer Leave Project

Fortunately JMU has a summer research leave program in place that allows eligible librarians to apply to be excused from normal job duties in order to dedicate three months on a focused research project. The research leaves are competitive and the recipient reports on the outcome of the research to the library faculty. The goal of the author's summer research leave was to visit other institutions, in-state and out-of-state, to examine how they train subject specialists/bibliographers in the areas of collection management and gather ideas for training selectors at JMU. The visits focused on universities of a similar size/make-up as JMU, schools with a clustered approach to collection development, or schools that have exemplary collection programs. During the course of the summer, the author visited Miami University of Ohio (Aaron Shrimplin), Indiana University (Charla Lancaster, Lynda Clendenning, Angela Courtney, Robert Goehlert, Moira Smith, and Julie Bobay), Virginia Tech (Paul Metz), The College of Charleston (Katina Strauch, Tom Gilson, Bob Neville, and Sheila Seaman), University of Virginia (Carol Hunter, Carla Lee, Dawn Waller, Lynda White, and Esther Onega), and Longwood University (Virginia Kinman.) The author also met with the OhioLINK Statewide Library Depository Coordinator (Dona Straley) and picked up techniques for coordinating projects and individuals at various locations. Cluster coordinators and other collection management librarians were interviewed via phone, John Abbott at Appalachian State and Sam Dunlap at University of California San Diego.

Findings from the Visits

One constant theme that emerged from the site visits was that collection management, by its very nature, has to be specific to the institution. Collection work varies based on a number of factors including: size of collection, size of school, number of selectors, or number of staff. Additionally, each school belongs to different consortia and has variant levels of support from endowments or grants. Library collections are constantly evolving to support changes in the institutional mission as well as curricular focus.

It was reassuring to discover that there isn't a "right answer" to training librarians in collection development practices. It was also apparent that some of the procedures currently in place at JMU serve the user population effectively, while other processes have room for improvement. It was very interesting to see how collections were defined at each institution and which department was responsible for overseeing collection work. At some schools collections fell into public services, while at other schools it resided within technical services. Additionally, at some schools all collection decisions funneled through a committee, at others a single individual made all of the collection decisions either with or without the counsel of other selectors.

Though the specific process of collection management varied from school to school, every interviewee stressed the importance of open communication, particularly in regard to budgetary decision making processes. Interestingly, everyone interviewed was extremely interested in collections, from the selectors to the administrators. Collections and discussions related to collections were an area of great interest because they impacted both those within the library as

well as departmental faculty outside the library walls. Some mentioned that discussions related to collection often provided a bridge to the departments which allowed librarians to highlight additional library services.

A sentiment that was echoed at many of the schools was that additional training of selectors would be welcome. Training regimens for selectors, either individuals new to subject areas or new to the profession, are wildly different from school to school. At some institutions there is a lot of hand-holding for new selectors while other collection managers are given free reign and encouraged to “learn as you go.” It was reassuring to discover that there isn’t a correct answer for training and a lot of the training will have to be local since collection interests are localized. Based on the content of the interviews at these schools, the training schedule below will be executed during Spring 2010 at JMU with the intention of heightening the awareness of collections as well as ensuring that selectors have received updated and consistent information about collections at JMU.

The Workshop Topics

Training workshops covering topics of collection assessment, weeding principles, evaluation of approval plans, and the use of statistics in collection development/evaluation were developed and will be implemented for JMU liaison librarians.

However, the workshop series which will be taking place during Spring 2010 will not be the first exposure for selectors at JMU to the work of the Collection Management department or the CDC. The CDC regularly reports on its activities at the monthly library faculty meeting. Additionally, the Collection Management Librarian and the Head of Acquisitions distributed a handout to all of the selectors detailing the skills expected of each selector as well as contact people for all tasks related to Collection Management and Acquisitions. The Collection Management Department also created a newsletter, the Liaisons’ Loop, from 2008-2009 to promote departmental services to selectors.

In addition to handouts and updates that selectors have seen, they will also be given homework to do before each workshop. Last year the Collection Management Department assembled portfolios for each subject area based on circulation data, database rankings, new book acquisitions, and university data about the academic department. Selectors will be encouraged to review this data before the relevant workshops so that they will be prepared to tie the information they gather from the workshops directly to their subject areas.

The workshops will each be an hour and a half and will occur the four consecutive weeks following the final deadline for firm budget expenditures. The first workshop will focus on the Collection Development Committee and will cover the topics of collection policies and the role of the Collection Development Committee. Discussions will include: Why do we need collection policies? What type of collection policies are necessary i.e. Reference policy and Gifts policy? What role does the subject policy play in the collection development process? It will also delineate: who makes decisions on topics related to collections? Who recommends action? What are the basic processes of the Collection Development Committee?

Week two of the workshop series will focus on part of the work of the Collection Management Department: Approval Plan, Gifts, and Statistics. This week will cover the function of an approval plan, understanding the selector responsibility in the approval plan process, and procedures for adjusting each plan. It will examine the current procedures for handling gift books, why selectors are asked about gift acquisitions, and discuss some of the recent large gift

donations. The statistics portion of the workshop will focus on elucidating the type of statistics that are currently being gathered as well as reports on demand and how selectors can use the statistics in their collection building and collection evaluation responsibilities. They will also learn the three tips within Excel that every selector should know.

The third workshop will cover the other responsibilities of the Collection Management Department: collection maintenance and new resource acquisitions. A guest speaker will present on when selectors are faced with decisions related to preservation. Weeding, lost and replacement procedures will also be covered. On the topic of new resources, the process for acquiring new items as well as differing procedures for one-time versus ongoing expenditures will be explained. Some tips on how to stay informed of what is new in each area will also be brainstormed.

The final week of the workshop series will look to the future and cover topics of Collection Development strategies as well as future trends in collections. During this week recommendations on how to become familiar with a new department, ideas on staying abreast of publishing trends, and how to collaborate with the departmental faculty will be examined. Future trends in collections will talk about the publishing world and how it's changing, what to do during the budgetary lean years, and issues relating to new publishing formats.

With the format of a workshop series, selectors can choose which sessions they would like to attend to brush up on those particular skills. While attendance at the workshops will be optional, many selectors have already indicated that they are eager to attend all of the workshops because they anticipate learning something new from each session.

Ideas for implementing a similar workshop series at your institution

Since all collections are local, it will be important to tailor the workshop topics to the local landscape. However, the following tips should prove useful regardless of the content changes. Workshops should be a good mix of information that provides common background fundamentals, applicable exercises to allow them to understand their collections, and time for shared brainstorming about future directions of collections. Break the topics into reasonable sized chunks. Allow for hands-on activities. Ask your selectors to put some thought into their collections ahead of time. Provide selectors with basic available statistics that will give them a snapshot of their collection, but let them know that there are additional statistics available that they can request. It is important to remember that many selectors do not spend all of their time and energy on collection development so it will be important to frame each topic for your audience and provide context as well as clear outcomes of each workshop.